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Written statement* submitted by the Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[06 February 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Towards Resilient Disaster Management in Jammu and Kashmir

During the past few years climate change has caused several extreme rainfall events in the Himalayas leading to disasters in Uttarakhand and Jammu and Kashmir. Unprecedented floods in Kashmir caused by torrential, prolonged and unseasonal rains in September 2014 were the worst in last one hundred years. The discharge was about 115,000 cusecs against a carrying capacity of 35,000 cusecs to be drained by river Jhelum. The flood and prolonged inundation resulted in heavy loss of lives (225 and 75 persons died in Jammu Province and Kashmir valley respectively), and property with tens of thousands of houses, shops and roads etc. destroyed and damaged. The deluge took the people and the authorities by surprise, as the summer capital Srinagar was submerged and the state machinery and police were all marooned. The quick response by Indian Prime Minister who lost no time in visiting the Valley to personally assess the damage and who promptly announced a slew of relief measures including interim package of 1,775 crore rupees, galvanized the disaster management effort by Indian army and National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) to launch a massive rescue and relief operation to bring the marooned people to safe places, and distribute food, water and medicines to them. Whereas the State government was largely immobilized, voluntary aid poured instantly from all corners of India in a touching demonstration of solidarity and support of the flood victims. Rescue and medical teams and NGO workers from different parts of India rushed to the Valley to render assistance. The national print and electronic media gave full coverage to the devastating floods and the rescue operations in the Valley, helping in mobilizing support from the civil society of India for the flood victims. However, the media coverage focused on the Valley, paying scant attention to Jammu province where eight districts were ravaged by the flooding of Tawi and Chenab rivers.

The floods have thrown up several lessons, which need to be learnt in order to put in place a resilient and effective disaster management programme in the State, so that no such calamities recur in future.

1. Ecological degradation, unplanned development and urbanization, large scale and unbalanced construction of roads and buildings particularly on river banks, encroachment of river beds, lakes and water bodies led to loss of wetlands exacerbating the disaster.
2. According to a 2004 analysis by J&K Remote Sensing Centre, Srinagar and its environs have lost 55% of lakes and wetlands area due to encroachments between the years 1911 and 2004. The area of wetlands went down from 13,428 to 6,407 hectares. The Dal lake in Srinagar has been reduced to over half its earlier size and the Wular lake once spread over 20,200 hectares has shrunk to 2,400 hectares.
3. Though there exist the Jammu and Kashmir National Calamities Destroyed Areas Improvement Act, 1955 and National Disaster Management Act, 2005, the disaster management and response by the State government was virtually missing at and during the time of floods. Even the State Chief Minister Omar Abdullah acknowledged, "I can't remember a single natural disaster in the country where the government tasked with responding was so completely paralysed. We had no way to communicate with anyone, we were totally and completely isolated from everyone and everywhere." (See his article in Indian Express 14 September 2014. pp.1-2.
4. The performance of Indian armed forces and the Valley youth was exemplary through their timely, heroic and humane efforts to rescue the affected people. Two armymen Naik Khem Chand and Meer Owais Hussain were drowned while trying to rescue the people trapped in gushing floods in South Kashmir.
5. Whereas the Indian army came in for praise from all quarters in the Valley for their selfless and heroic rescue efforts against various odds, the separatists came in for flak from the locals for trying to disrupt the Indian army rescue operations. In some stray incidents, some separatists even slashed the boats provided by the army to ferry the marooned persons out of the flood waters to safe places. The stone throwing by some separatists on the rescue teams and even on the helicopters flying at low altitudes for evacuating the people to safety did not deter the Indian army from carrying out its rescue and relief operations. Kashmiris know the truth and have an uncanny sense of understanding as to who helped and who failed them in their hour of crisis.
6. The unprecedented crisis brought out the best in the local people. In Srinagar, policemen and undertrials shared unusual bonding in the worst days of the flood. At the Shaheed Gunj police station in Srinagar, Fayaz a criminal known for his frequent run-ins with the police, jumped into the reging waters several times to save the marooned policemen. In another case, a thief who had eluded cops, joined them to help

rescue a family stuck at the top of a building (See When criminals came to cop's rescue. Times of India, 23 September 2014. p.14.).

7. Wary of corruption and malpractices by sections of local administration, the Valley welcomed central government initiative to send cash relief to the affected people directly through bank transfers to their accounts. Even when the State government asked for about 50,000 crore rupees from the central government for relief and rehabilitation, the local people would like such relief to be disbursed directly to them in order to bypass the local corrupt officialdom. There is also concern over the equitable distribution of central funds for relief and rehabilitation in both Jammu and Kashmir provinces of the State.
8. There is urgent need for dredging river Jhelum, desilt and improve depth of the river, bed grade and also create a parallel spill channel upto Baramulla.
9. The flood protection channel which was built in 1912 and which runs parallel to river Jhelum in Srinagar, needs to be desilted and cleared of encroachments and unauthorized constructions. A comprehensive drainage and sewerage system alongwith unclogging of the waterways including the famous Dal lake of unauthorized constructions needs to be undertaken on a priority basis.
10. That the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 restricts the Jammu and Kashmir State to have only run-of-the river hydel projects for generating electricity, has exacerbated the problem. Since no construction of dams including the Wular navigation project has been done due to objections raised by Pakistan, the water storage capacity in the Valley is limited due to the Treaty provisions. These dams if built could hold large quantities of water and save the State from any such inundation. Further, it would also keep the water levels stable and prevent any overflow across the border into Pakistan held territory. This practical aspect coupled with the climate change patterns and extreme weather conditions in the Himalayan region, need to be viewed realistically to enable the Jammu and Kashmir State enhance its water storage capacity through the construction of dams. This will result in a win-win situation for India, Pakistan and Kashmir.